

OBITUARY

HIMMATSINHJI

October 09, 1928 to February 22, 2008

With the passing away of Himmatsinhji on 22nd February, 2008, a remarkable tradition came to an end. Bawa Saheb, as he was affectionately called by the many recognized birdwatchers of Kachchh (the newly spelt name of Cutch), joined the Society as a Life Member on January 29, 1952 shortly after he completed his education. He already had a great knowledge of the birdlife of his area being the youngest of four sons of His Highness Maharajdhiraj Mirza Maharao Vijayrajji Sawai Bahadur, the Maharao of Cutch, who commissioned the Kachchh Ornithological Surveys by Dr. Sálím Ali during 1943-44 and financed the *BIRDS OF CUTCH* incorporating his and updating earlier publications of the birds of the region by several 19th century British ornithologists. These latter had all come in close contact with the Princely family and Himmatsinhji's Great Grandfather Maharao Pragmalji had commissioned a natural history museum in Bhuj. His Grandfather Maharao Khengar was among the founding members of the Bombay Natural History Society! It was he who informed the ornithological world of the existence of the immense nesting colony of Large Flamingos in the Great Rann of Kachchh and provided support for a visit to the site by the Society's McCann in 1939.

During the year preceding his passing away, Himmatsinhji was updating *BIRDS OF CUTCH* and he and I had a series of telephonic discussions on specific species, the last being a rather lengthy one on the Black-necked Stork. His phone came while I was actually watching a pair of the storks on the Jamnagar side of the Gulf of Kachchh! We agreed to meet in Kachchh during the first half of the next year (2008): to my eternal regret, it was not to be.

The era in which Himmatsinhji grew up with its English governesses, and British and Indian private tutors effectively ended to the swirling bagpipe tunes of regimental bands as the English marched through the India Gate of Bombay (now Mumbai) to embark on the waiting barges to take them to the troop ships lying in the harbour followed by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's midnight "Tryst with Destiny" speech to the Indian Parliament. He had just left the Rajkumar College, Rajkot in June of 1947, and gone up to the Bombay University to study agriculture at the Wadia College, Pune. He took to the new era with considerable verve entering the hurly burly of politics and defeating the then formidable Congress Party to represent Kachchh as the Member of Parliament from 1962 to 1967. I had the privilege of touring Kachchh with him at the wheel on a couple of occasions and

I vividly remember the visit we made to the Chachhlo Dhand where I photographed a magnificent male Great Indian Bustard with the massif of the extinct volcano Dhinodhar in the background. He delighted in taking us to Vijay Villas Palace set amidst fine mango orchards on the Mandvi seacoast and I could visualize his childhood there getting familiar with the great variety of birds that visited the gardens. In the background were Casuarina plantations and magnificent sand dunes overlooking the Mandvi beach. He spoke of the Houbara Bustards that wintered there and the several species of Falcon that hunted for Larks and Buntings among the grass covered dunes. It was here that he recorded the Racquet-tailed Drongo and the Scarlet Minivet. The former he collected and sent to the BNHS, the latter observation accepted by the Society reflecting the total faith that Sálím Ali reposed in his expertise. Years later, when I suggested that he might have seen the migratory Long tailed Minivet from the Western Himalaya, his response was so typical of him: "You have totally floored me!" There was a great mutual respect between us throughout the long association which his passing away terminated. I had always felt he should have far, far more notes and articles on the birds of his area than the few notes that he did write, but when I did once remonstrate, he gently smiled and responded "This like a pot calling the kettle Black!"

The birdwatchers of Gujarat had arranged a grand meet at Hingol gadh on February 24, to remember all the past ornithologists like Maharajkumar Dharmakumarsinhji, Dr. Sálím Ali, and Shivraj Kumar Khachar and to felicitate me on entering my 78th year. While not expecting him to attend in person, we had anticipated a message from him, instead, his passing away on February 22, converted the get together into a meeting of condolence for a much loved member of our fraternity.

Himmatsinhji married Princess Padmini Kumari of Wankaner, a family of naturalists in their own rights. She preceded him by a little over a year. Himmatsinhji is survived by a daughter and two grandsons and one granddaughter. The several knowledgeable birdwatchers of Kachchh feel orphaned and the Society has lost a loyal member who cherished memories of Dr. Sálím Ali and other staff of the Society who had worked in Kachchh during the "Mist Net" operations in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

LAVKUMAR KHACHAR